

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL THOMAS MCGRATH,
COMMANDER, ARSIC SOUTH, KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM
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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, OASD PA): Okay, well,
we can go ahead and get started here, I suppose. So Amy, if the colonel's
ready, we're ready when you are.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay, great. I'm here, Jack. Nice to hear from you
again.

For those who don't know me, my name's Colonel Tom McGrath. I'm the
commander of the Afghan Regional Security Integration Command here in Kandahar,
which is in southern Afghanistan. And my job is to train, mentor and advise the
Afghan National Army and the Afghan National Police.

What I'd like to talk about -- I'll talk about anything today, but
opening comment, I'll just talk a little bit about some of the things that we've
done in reconstruction and development, because that also falls in our lane
also; and some of the construction under way for the 2/7 Marines that I have a
TACON -- tactical control -- over, and I use the Commanders Emergency Response
Program, which is earmarked for humanitarian assistance efforts within the
region.

I just want to share with you some insight on a few of our projects
and efforts here in Kandahar and throughout the region, and then I want to speak
to you about the six-month-old Ministry of Defense hospital that we just built
over at the 205th Hero Corps. Nothing really too sexy, but actually it's very
important stuff in a counterinsurgency that you are able to build up the
capacity, and then using the reconstruction money and development monies that we
have, we're able to reach out to the Afghan civilians and the forces also so
that we can build better relationships with them. And I'm talking about roads
and helping them farm, sending out tools and things of that nature.

I also build bases, forward operating bases, and we put about \$30
million into several projects here. I've got 14 FOBs -- forward operating bases
-- being constructed from the ground up. And right now we're preparing a bundle
of them for the new 2/7 police mentoring mission that we have going out in the
western part of my area and also further west into one of the other regional
commands.

Once these FOBs are built, we'll have all our mentor teams out there
working with the newly trained Afghan National Police that we're going to pull

together in that area, and we'll also have them out amongst the population because -- two part. We want to train up the police, but we also want to show the population that we're stabilizing things.

So we're going to pave roads. We're going to dig wells. We're going to help give them seed for farming, tools, and things of that nature.

And what that does is it allows you to, you know, build that relationship with them. They come to trust you and they know that the coalition forces -- in this case, the Marines -- but not just Marines, also my police and army mentors throughout the country -- that, you know, we're here to help. We're here to build stability for the region, not to build an empire or anything like that.

So it's been going well for the last year. We put a lot of money into the different FOBs and the CERP program. I wish I had more money. I don't. But, you know, that's the way it goes. We just continue to, you know, do it the best that we can.

I've spent almost \$2 million in CERP funds for projects throughout southern Afghanistan. That's from building schools, like I said, irrigation systems, wells, community development, orphanages -- helping kids out in orphanages and things like that. And I had a PMT last year in Kelat, which is in the eastern district, in Zabul, and offered HA, or humanitarian aid, to a local village. And they refused that aid, however. And a few months later they welcomed them back with open arms because we were able to push the Taliban out of the area. So security is very important. And as I said earlier, you have that two-pronged effort.

I've got a whole bunch of projects going on right now, about \$600,000 worth -- 16 projects, as a matter of fact. Several are agricultural projects, which are important to sustaining the villages. It's a very rural society down here, very, very austere. So this is very important. We handed out almost 200 tons of wheat over the wintertime. And there's wheat being grown all over Afghanistan. And actually, what I've been told is the wheat price is higher than the poppy price, so we may have had some good luck in this.

The last thing I want to mention, a topic that makes me proud, is what our medical folks are going down here and that we built a hospital for the 205th corps -- a military hospital, but it allows the police to come in also.

And that's a fully functioning hospital, operating rooms, X-ray, all the different departments that you'd see in a regular hospital. And it's working quite well.

And I have 16 U.S. Air Force medical embedded trainers with them who assist the doctors and the other medical folks there to take care of the ANA, not just for emergencies, because we bring in a lot of those who have been involved in combat, who are shot up, and they do one heck of a job -- we fly them in and then we bring them into the hospital -- but also normal medical issues that you would see in any hospital across -- off the United States, whether it's lab testing, X-rays, dental care, things of that nature.

So I'm pretty excited about that. It's -- it also helps take care of the Afghan soldiers and some of the -- and the police, not some of them, the police. So they know if they're wounded or injured or sick, they can come to

the hospital and receive care. And trust me, that's a big morale-booster, as you can imagine. And it's something they haven't had before.

So not only are we training the police and the army very rigorously and very vigorously throughout the region, but we're also involved in the entire counterinsurgency way of doing things, which just isn't the kinetic thing; it's also the non-kinetic. And that pays off quite handsomely when we do our operations.

That's it for an opening statement. If you have any questions, I'll be more than happy to answer some.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you very much, sir.

Troy, why don't you get us started?

Q Okay. How are you doing, sir? This is Troy Steward from Bouhammer.com.

COL. MCGRATH: Hi.

Q A couple questions. I have a question, then I have a follow-up that dovetails right onto the first one.

COL. MCGRATH: Sure.

Q The National Guard has and DOD has started to at least put one team into, I believe, maybe Eastern 201st or somewhere. But these agricultural teams, mostly made up -- I think the recent one is out of Missouri National Guard -- to help with, you know, zone team with zone security, doing agricultural reconstruction, essentially. Are any of those teams in place yet to where they're projected to be?

And then to dovetail on that, if they are or aren't, are you using any CERP funds to help farmers get off of opium cultivation and using funds in any way to help them or educate them or give them a kick start to grow something else, to get them off of trying to grow opium?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah. Thank you, Troy. Good question.

Presently I don't have the agriculture teams. And I'm not programmed to get those, as far as I know. I would welcome them, because they play a very critical role. There's also some anthropology teams that come in and assist with the different populations. So we're all about doing that.

I don't use CERP money as part of a counternarcotics program, so that people will grow alternatives to the poppy. I know there's some other programs out there that they're doing. But we're not involved in that. What we will do though on our own initiative is use humanitarian aid, which is different from a CERP project, to get them the seed.

The example is the wheat, the 200 tons of wheat that we handed out over Zabul province. And it's been very, very successful, because the price of wheat just serendipitously is pretty high. It's higher than the poppy.

But no, we don't -- I don't have the active program to say, grow this instead of poppy, as part of a larger plan. I just don't have the structure to do that.

Q Okay. Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay.

Maggie.

Q Hi, Colonel.

COL. MCGRATH: Hi.

Q On your military hospital, who approached who with that idea? Of all the projects you could pick up, why did that come up?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, that was actually, Maggie, part of a larger plan drawn up a few years ago. Each of the corps headquarters where we -- in Kandahar, we have a corps headquarters; has barracks has, you know, communications centers and command-and-control centers.

And they designed a hospital; wasn't anything that we, that I put together. I'd love to take credit for it but I can't. And however it opened while we were here. And we've been able to take full advantage of it.

Q Okay. And a quick follow-up, if I could.

COL. MCGRATH: Sure.

Q I read your bio.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah.

Q Where are you really from?

Gate of Heaven? Saint Augustine?

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, I'm a Gatey guy. As a matter of fact, I got commissioned on Old Ironsides back on June 20th, 1981.

How about you? I saw you -- you're a townie.

Q I'm a -- yeah, I'm a townie. (Laughter.)

COL. MCGRATH: So where you from in Charlestown?

Q The (wrong hills ?) between the Constitution and the monument.

COL. MCGRATH: Okay. I know that well. Yes, indeed. We probably know each other. (Laughter.)

Q Well, I told them this is the only one I wasn't going to need an interpreter for.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, that's true. I picked up -- I just heard that voice of home. I was like, oh, that sounds wonderful. Well, that's wonderful.

My family's still back in Southie, and my sister lives in my mother's house, and my other sister lives where my father grew up. So, you know about Irish people: we never leave home.

Q That's right.

COL. MCGRATH: Except for me. (Chuckles.) Go, Celtics, right?

Q Oh, the games.

MR. HOLT: Well, sir, I've got a question on the -- about the hospital as well. Is there -- what are the community assets that are in the area there? Was there any type of --

COL. MCGRATH: We have some -- yeah, we have a Kandahar city hospital downtown. It's not in very good shape. It's in a very dangerous area of the city. So we don't want to be sending military people down into that area. They don't have a lot -- you know, the illiteracy rate down here is just tremendous, unfortunately. So they don't have a lot of the oversight that's needed. They also don't have a lot of the structure that you would see in a normal hospital, whether it's the X-ray text; where it's, you know, the person that signs you into the hospital or anything like that. So it's very haphazard.

And what we've been able to put up here is have the surgical teams inside of that hospital that can take the wounded that come in and operate immediately. And you know, that golden hour is very important to get them from the battlefield into a hospital, and we've been able to do that.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Any follow-up questions?

Q Yeah, this is Troy. I've got some.

MR. HOLT: Yeah, sure, Troy. Go ahead.

Q Sir, on the one program that was in place, at least when I was there, and I have not seen any press about it, or releases -- a weapons buyback program. I'm kind of curious. Is that still in place? Is it in place in the 205th Corps area? And then are the funds being used up? And then have you seen a good return of functional weapons being turned in, not just broken, you know, torn-up weapons?

COL. MCGRATH: We don't have a -- I'm not big on weapons buyback, (for a start, in there ?), because I -- (audio break) -- (yields ?) bad weapons. What we do have -- and it's been very successful -- I'll buy weapons back, but we haven't been active about it.

We do have a special rewards program that I have money for, where people, if they turn in IEDs' locations, Taliban weapons caches and things of that nature, we'll pay them. And that's a very active program. It's been very successful.

Q Okay. And that's for sizeable turn-ins or something of some real use, right?

COL. MCGRATH: Well, yeah. You know, sure. PPIEDs, the location of where those -- where they dug them in, things of that nature, we'll pay directly for that. But I'm not doing a one-to-one weapons exchange. I think I get more out of focusing my money on the special rewards program and -- small rewards program, excuse me. We get more bang for the buck, if you will, out of that.

Q Right, right, yeah. I would agree. We ran into those same problems. We didn't have the kind of funds, so we had get genius with the way we rewarded kids who brought stuff in, because it usually seemed to be kids.

COL. MCGRATH: I was in Iraq. I mean, they were turning in stuff, you know, that was 50 years old, they dug out of the ground, and things of that nature. (Chuckles.) It was kind of funny. But now we've been getting all kinds of -- all kinds of different weapons, actually, caches. And the big thing is IEDs.

We actually had a group a couple of months ago that ran out into the road and tried to inform -- not inform, but notify one of our ETTs that were driving down the road that there was an IED there. And unfortunately, the IED went off and the guy got wounded. We were able to go back and help him get medical care and also make a payment to him and his family. We thought that was very important.

And it just shows you that the Afghan people are looking for security. They want that security and they want to be -- you know, they want the Taliban to go away. As I said in former interviews, the Taliban bring nothing to the table. They do nothing to help these people out around here. And they just -- you know, they want that help, and we're able to bring it to them whenever we can.

Q Right, yeah. That's a huge statement.

That's a heck of a good-news story here that doesn't get out, to have a local Afghan risk his life to do that.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, it is a very good news story. And that's why we're talking. (Laughs.)

MR. HOLT: Well, sir, could you tell us a little bit about the 2/7 Marines? How are they lined out?

COL. MCGRATH: Oh, they're doing great. They're pretty much deployed out into the operating areas. I won't say where they are right now, but its out west. They're deploying into police mentor teams and security teams. We're starting to train the new Afghan recruits that are going to go into some set districts, some critical districts. They're going to be used in stabilizing that area.

Right now we just got a couple of -- well, we got a bunch of recruits in, a large number of recruits, that we're going to send through eight weeks of intensive training, rigorous training, performance-oriented training. Then they will come back and our Marines, 2/7, will assist in mentoring them and also going out on patrol with them.

They've been very active out there. They're getting very good feedback, atmospherics, from the locals. They're very excited to see them. They want them to remain. And I'm very excited about this, because the 2/4

Marines, which are fighting down in the southern part of Helmand, they don't work for me, but I just want to say they're doing one heck of a job. They are engaging a lot of Taliban, killing them. They are also finding a lot of weapons caches.

It's destabilizing the entire Taliban operation down there. It's going to disrupt them in their capabilities to move and to infiltrate, and that's going to have effects on the rest of the region. And by stabilizing the region with newly trained police officers -- in this case 2/7 -- is going to have an incredible effect on the future security of Regional Command South.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir. And they're working -- the 2/4 is kind of working in conjunction, synchronized, it sounds a bit like, with your RDD program to help stabilize that area with the 2/7.

COL. MCGRATH: Yeah, they bring in -- well, they're actually separate from 2/7, but they are doing reconstruction and development down there also. But they're doing some kinetic operations there. They're having a great effects. And I'm not sure if that's getting out, but that might be a story for you to follow on. They're doing one heck of a job, and it's going to have effects on what -- everything else that we're doing out to the region.

And 2/7 is very robust. They had the Iraq police mission last year. They come in with all kinds of experience. We're excited about having them down here. There's a lot of momentum going on here right now in Kandahar region. And I think we're at a tipping point, if you will, in moving forward with huge steps. That's pretty much what I'll say about that -- lot of momentum and good things are going to happen from that.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

Anyone have their questions? Any other follow-ups? (Pause.) Well, all right --

Q (Off mike) -- I'll take another shot.

MR. HOLT: Sure. Go ahead.

COL. MCGRATH: Sure.

Q Sir, on the 2/7 Marines and the in-district reforms, which is -- kind of what I understand, talking you with before, is kind of a different model from the rest of your PMTs, have you seen enough from that to make an assessment whether that may be a model to use across all your PMT teams, or do you think you would still use that with just the Marine rotation cycle?

COL. MCGRATH: I'll probably just use it with the Marine rotation cycle. We have the focused district development cycle that we're able to use in more secure areas, so they can move out entire police forces. It's also an issue of capacity and having the right amount of security forces in place. Where the Marines are going, they're taking a lot of risk. It's pretty high -- a lot of Taliban where they're going. And so that program seems to be set forward by taking bits and pieces out and training and then -- and flip-flopping back and forth. But -- it's very risky, but that's how you win. And the Marines are a great choice to do that.

Q Okay. A kind of a follow-on question to that is, one of the things that I have personally felt would be beneficial in the police mission since it was -- since Task Force Phoenix assumed it was having an active-duty MP brigade, since it really probably would require a brigade or a couple battalion -- take over the police mentoring.

Do you see that that would be beneficial maybe in the future once they get a baseline set of skills in place, to really have them come in to mentor true police skills and tasks that they could train the Afghan police on, or would you think it would continue to be a National Guard/active duty mission like it is now?

COL. MCGRATH: I think it's going to continue the way it is. I'm not -- I really can't speculate what's coming down in the future when it comes to force structure in the area. An MT brigade would be -- (chuckles) -- trust me, I'd welcome them with open arms. You know, we're short on mentors. We need another couple of thousand throughout the country. I need about 8(00) or 900 down here to fill out completely. And I can do more if I have those mentors, but I don't.

But one thing we are doing is reaching out to the international communities to send civilian police down so that they can work at the higher echelons of the police departments, with the police chiefs and their staffs, to teach them on policing methods. And then as things get more secure, we can start moving them down into the individual districts. Right now in general it's not secure enough to push all the civilians down there.

But, you know, to answer your question, I don't see -- I don't know of any MT brigades or anything like that coming in. I think it would definitely help if they did. And any additional mentorship numbers would allow me to speed up what I'm doing already.

Q Right. I guess I didn't word my question a hundred percent correctly what I wanted to get across. I guess my thought was -- my question was going towards when we first took over the police mission, we were kind of curious why we did because we were a whole bunch of infantrymen and stuff, and we're like, "We don't know anything about being police." But we realized they were at such a low level that they needed just basic skills in place -- planning, training, how to just deal with people.

So my thought is, if as they talk about a surge next year in 2009 in Afghanistan and possibly adding a lot more forces to the Task Force Phoenix mission, if maybe -- your opinion, I guess, for lack of a better word, would be that maybe that would be at a time that we would have established enough base skills and baselined the (AMT ?) that we could kick it up a notch and take it more to job-specific AIT-type training and get them -- COL. MCGRATH: Oh, absolutely. We want to set the security down here first.

It's not there yet, because we haven't trained a large number of police officers. But we're slowly getting there. Actually we're quickly getting there.

And then we want to up it into doing policing skills, skills and tasks, vice infantry tasks. So yes, I think an MP brigade or civilian police could come in, like we've done in other parts, Kosovo and Bosnia and Haiti and things like that, and then work on the policing skills would be great.

They're just not ready yet for that. It's still more infantry skills, because the security situation is still not where it needs to be. But the plan is to move them up and get into those policing skills.

And actually the training that they go through in the regional training centers, and what we're going to do with the in-district reform, a large portion of that training will be actual policing skills.

Q Okay, good. Thank you, sir.

COL. MCGRATH: And that would be trained by the -- (off mike) -- folks.

Q Roger.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Maggie, do you have anything else?

Q I'm good.

MR. HOLT: All right.

Well, sir, thank you very much for joining us again today. Colonel Thomas J. McGrath: He is the commander of the ARSIC South, Afghan Regional Security Integration Command South, out of Kandahar, Afghanistan. A lot of good things happening down there, sir.

Thank you very much for joining us. And we look forward to speaking with you again.

COL. MCGRATH: Well, I appreciate the opportunity. And I want to thank each and every one of you in appearing here. You know, we need to get the good word out on the good things that are going on down here. And I think you're the right group of folks to do that. You've got large -- people follow you closely and read your blogs. And I'm glad I have the opportunity to talk to you. So thank you all very much.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

END.